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Jon Hamilton

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Transcript



A duck covered in a thick coating of crude oil, picked up when it lighted on waters off Carpinteria State Beach in Santa Barbara County, Calif., after the oil spill in January 1969.

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On January 28, 1969, an oil well off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif., experienced a blowout. The result was an oil spill that at the time ranked as the largest in U.S. waters.

The disaster, which made headlines across the nation, helped create the modern environmental movement. It also led to restrictions on offshore drilling — restrictions the Trump Administration is trying to loosen.

The events that led to the spill began one morning on Platform A, a rig located about six miles from the coast and operated at the time by Union Oil.

Workers had already drilled four wells from the platform and were drilling a fifth when they ran into a problem.

"You punch into some of these oil reservoirs and you get a lot of back pressure," says Douglas McCauley, a marine biologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

McCauley has brought me out to Platform A on a boat, which circles the rig as he talks.

He tells me that in this case, the back pressure overwhelmed the well's safety systems. This allowed crude oil and natural gas trapped thousands of feet down to rocket toward the surface.

"So they're taking these big drilling pipes and shoving them back down the hole and these gigantic steel blocks on top of that to seal off this blowout," McCauley says. It worked, but only for a few minutes.

"They had capped off the blowout successfully," McCauley says. "But they created so much pressure at the bottom of this well that it actually broke open the seabed."



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Jon Hamilton/NPR

Better reinforcement of the well might have prevented the spill. But Union Oil had received a waiver from the government that allowed the company to drill without installing steel casing pipe to the depth usually required by federal regulations.

Unimpeded, oil and gas under tremendous pressure opened five separate gashes in the soft sandstone seabed. So much gas bubbled to the surface near Platform A that the water appeared to boiling. And oil from the underwater fissures began to form a slick that would eventually cover an area nearly the size of Chicago.

The effect on marine life was profound.

"Right where we're sitting right now you transformed from this ecosystem of amazing richness, amazing biodiversity, amazing biological activity into a sort of Armageddon of blackness," McCauley says.